ABSTRACT

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Kabir, the weaver-poet, has continued to permeate many facets of Indian society since his life in the fifteenth century. The poetry attributed to him is a large body of work existing in oral, print, recording, and other forms that encompasses much more today than what Kabir said in his lifetime. Between the biting social criticisms and intimate devotional messages, the poetry bridges many ideological gaps, ensuring its longevity. Through fieldwork across India, I came to understand Kabir as a musical tradition, rooted in poetry, that continually renews its sonic character to speak to new generations while maintaining a heterogeneous variety of styles (folk, classical, semi-classical, and more). Predominantly studied previously as a text-based tradition, a focus on the range of musical styles and content that Kabir encompasses enables us to understand its popularity across religious, socioeconomic, and generational divisions and provides insights into Kabir's place in today's North Indian society.

“SAYS KABIR”: UNBOUNDED SOUNDS

By

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Dedication

To my mom and dad for their love and support in all of my adventures.

Acknowledgements

Words cannot express the gratitude I owe to the many members of the Kabir community, especially Prahladji for his love, patience, and acceptance. Thank you to Falguni, Meenakshi, Swati, and the rest of the Kabir community of Mumbai for the countless hours of conversation and singing, all of the help received, and the new friendships made throughout my visits to India. I also owe many thanks to Linda Hess, whose scholarship helped pave the way for my own research, particularly her forthcoming book that she graciously shared with me. This project would not have been possible without the guidance and advice of my advisor, Larry Witzleben, and my committee members. Lastly, a special thanks to my dear friend Kirk for the many hours he spent listening to me talk.

Transliteration Note

A modified scholarly transliteration, similar to that of distinguished Kabir scholar Linda Hess, is employed throughout this thesis, favoring spellings that approximate correct pronunciation. Some common instrument names are used frequently in musical discourse and are not italicized (harmonium, tabla). Proper names are not italicized and do not show diacritical marks, with the exception of song titles.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Meeting Kabir

Kabira khaḍa bazār mein. In the market stands Kabir. Travel across India long enough, and you too will find Kabir; he might be in the market, or he might be somewhere less expected. It may come as a surprise, then, when I tell you that Kabir—also written as Kabīr, Kabira, or Kabeer—is a fifteenth-century poet, many years gone at this point. So how did I meet Kabir, in the market or anywhere else? How does anyone meet Kabir? Meeting Kabir will naturally be different from person to person, but chances are that if you are living in India, specifically North India, you will meet Kabir not in the market but in school. I, on the other hand, did meet Kabir in the market, in the form of a CD and a book of poetry.

My journey with Kabir has been interesting and unexpected, to say the least. The first time I listened to this CD set, entitled *Ghat Ghat Kabir* (In Every Body Kabir), I understood only minimal Hindi, but instantly fell in love with the sounds. This CD poetry set consisted of songs from ten artists I had never heard before. The first artist, Mukhtiyar Ali, sang soaring lines in a high range, accompanied by harmonium and what was probably a *dhol*, although it could be a combination of drums as well. Without understanding the meaning, I was already captivated. The next track was a complete 180-degree turn. The drone began, then tabla, and already it was clear this was a classical-style piece. The singer Shubha Mudgal entered with long-held syllables before moving to the text, embellishing her notes as is typical in

Hindustani vocal pieces. The CD continues in this manner, one track after the next, each one different from the last. With every new track, I became more entranced and intrigued by the music. Sonically, I was sold. Of course, I have a bias for many types of Indian music, classical and others, but this combination of sounds on one CD was different from what I was used to hearing in any medium inside or outside of India.

In line with my inquisitive nature, my engagement with Kabir did not end with the last syllables on the CD; there was a book of poetry to explore. The collection included poems both in Hindi (not transliterated, but in Devanagari script) and in English translations. As already mentioned, my Hindi was not then what it is now, so digesting this material was a slow and difficult process. Moreover, I was dealing with poetry, so using this for comprehension and language practice was not the most productive, ideal task. Eventually I settled for the satisfaction derived from the recorded sounds; that is, until I entered graduate school and began conceptualizing my thesis. This music that intrigued me so much was the obvious choice, but I still had no idea what it meant. So, I set off on the journey of understanding Kabir. It would be a lie to say today that I fully understand Kabir, and I'm not sure that any one person truly can (though many claim to and some even claim to speak for him today in a sense).[1] However, I do understand Kabir in much more depth than I did two years ago.

The most important encounter along my path to discovery of Kabir was the discovery of someone who was like me. Some might think it blasphemous to compare Kabir to myself, but Kabir was after all a person, and one with whom I share certain

[1] See Shabnam Virmani's film *Had Anhad* for more on this.

ideologies. Without getting into my personal religious beliefs and philosophical theories, suffice it to say that Kabir and I share similar thoughts on many topics. Of course, there are differences as well; Kabir was a gifted poet, among other things, and I am not. However, this does not change the fact that I discovered Kabir and was instantly sold on the sounds alone, only to later uncover the fact that the sounds were a small part of Kabir; the much larger, more important part—his ideology—also resonated with me. The more I know of Kabir, the more inspired by Kabir I am.

Methodology

Although this project technically consists largely of fieldwork carried out in the summer of 2013 and in January 2014, in combination with a review of the relevant literature and media (films, YouTube, CDs), in reality the groundwork for this project was laid long before that. My relationship with Indian music goes back roughly five years, before ever setting foot in India. I am a Western classically trained percussionist, so a natural way into India was through the percussive instruments; I started with tabla. In 2009, I began lessons with my guru in Raleigh, NC, followed by an intensive study in Kolkata, India, the following summer. This short introductory time in India served as springboard for my musical and linguistic involvement in Indian culture. After that first summer, I returned to India again for almost a year. It was during that year that I purchased *Ghat Ghat Kabir*. During that time I studied Hindi and worked at a youth development non-governmental organization, where I was also exposed to Kabir directly and indirectly.

These first two trips served as the basis for my next two research trips. In the summer of 2013 I returned for a two-month Hindi-language intensive study, followed

by a month of dedicated fieldwork in 2013 and again in early 2014. The intensive language immersion was vital for my success in the field; the workshop I attended in the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh with well-known Kabir singer Prahlad Tipanya was conducted entirely in Hindi. Following the workshop in Madhya Pradesh, I returned to Jaipur, Rajasthan, the location of the Hindi intensive course. After connecting with a friend of a friend through colleagues from my time working in Delhi, I travelled to another city in Rajasthan—Bikaner—and conducted a number of interviews with and observations of local musicians known for singing Kabir. Although there has been some question about the necessity and the privileged position of playing an instrument as a method for participant-observer fieldwork (Bigenho 2008), I contend that it is essential in many cases, mine included, and does provide a perspective unattainable without the legitimacy that comes along with playing an instrument or partaking in musical fieldwork on more than a strictly observational level.

After arriving in Bikaner, my contact, Gopal, took me to meet two different musicians. In the afternoon, I met with the first musician who invited me into his house, sang for me, and answered my lingering questions. I met the second musician that night, in the backstage area at a concert he was playing. After being introduced, word quickly spread that I play tabla, and all the musicians independently introduced themselves, questioned me briefly, and made sure that I was comfortable. I was seated on stage during the concert, at the request of the singer, the musician I had come there to meet. During a break in the concert, where important individuals are honored with a plaque and flowers, I was called up front, given my gifts, and asked to

speak about myself to the crowd; and, of course, I was expected to play tabla. Speaking in Hindi in front of hundreds was nerve-wracking, but manageable. Luckily, I escaped without having to musically prove myself in front of the group—the fact that I had the ability to do so was sufficient. The next day, I was invited to the singer's house for a private meeting and conversation about Kabir. After we were comfortably seated on the floor, the singer's tabla accompanist entered and began preparing his tabla. But before we could start, the singer wanted me to play for him. After a short piece, he said, "good, you are sitting the right way, many do not do this correctly" (personal communication, Shivji Suthar, 2013).

There are many benefits to learning to perform as fieldwork, as explained by John Baily (2008). While all resonate in differing levels in my own fieldwork, I find his discussion of status, identity, and participation in musical events most helpful to explain my own fieldwork. Time and time again throughout my fieldwork, I have been asked what I do and who I am. Explaining ethnomusicology, as any ethnomusicologist knows, can be difficult. However, once I try my best to explain what I do and inevitably land on my own musical skills, my role becomes clearer to my new friends in the field. Although my main purpose is not to play music, a wonderful unintended benefit, it is easier to conceive of my presence in the field as a musician who does some research (whatever that means to others), as opposed to any other roles. Even if I do not specialize in the same styles as those I am working with (in this case, most musicians were folk artists, while I studied classical tabla), the knowledge that I have musical competency on a difficult Indian instrument provides introduction, justification, and validation of me not only as a musician, but as

someone who loves India and has put forth the effort to be a part of the Indian community.

Beyond the legitimacy I gain from playing tabla, my musical and work connections also made my fieldwork possible. Through my work connections in Delhi, I met many people who assisted me in my research by housing me, connecting me to others, offering friendship and guidance, and more. In the summer of 2013 I left with many new ideas, but still much research left to do. In January 2014, I returned to India for the Kabir Festival Mumbai, a five-day festival featuring many artists (musicians, dancers, a storyteller, and more). The fieldwork did not stop when I returned home from the field, since the bonds I made while overseas continue to thrive and my conversations about Kabir have not ceased. Countless conversations, hours of recordings, pages of notes, and a pile of CDs and DVDs, synthesized with my own understanding of Kabir and coupled with the insightful words of other scholars in the field, made my thesis possible.

Literature Review

Kabir's life story is ambiguous, filled with tales that are unverifiable, although some are more plausible, and thus accepted, than others. Like many historically focused texts, there are contradictions between various accounts, with some overlap of ideas that are generally accepted as the most likely or plausible event. Most collections of Kabir poetry or literature on him in general include a short synopsis of his life; I drew from many of these but I most often referred to Vinay Dharwadker's 2003 *Kabir: the Weaver's Songs* for Kabir's complicated biographical information as well as for an overview of the various texts containing Kabir's poetry, the different

traditions of Kabir that exist throughout North India, and poetic meaning. Like most other Kabir literature, in addition to the biographical and theoretical information Dharwadker includes poems, translated into English, along with the bibliographic information available for each poem. The life of Kabir, discussed in detail in chapter two, is important because of the role it plays in the creation and social contextualization of his work. Many other authors should also be credited with their work on Kabir's life and works (Vaudeville 1974; Sethi 1984; Hawley 2004).

Due to the nature of Kabir's poetry, discussed in depth later, much of the writings about or relating to Kabir come from religious studies. Linda Hess is one of the most prominent scholars writing on Kabir today, and her work has greatly informed my own. Her 1983 co-authored book with Sukhdev Singh, *The Bījak of Kabir*, served as an introduction into much more than Kabir's life. This work not only gives translations of many poems, but also investigates Kabir's work on a literary basis. Included in her introduction is a discussion of the linguistic choices of Kabir's work in the *Bījak*. Word choice and style are not the only things Hess focuses on here; she also gives insight into the meaning of selected poems, illuminating concepts that may be missed by some readers, buried under poetic vernacular.

In a similar vein, her comparison of the three Kabir collections in the 1987 edited volume *The Sants* looks at the greater body of Kabir's works as they are conceived by the various strains of Kabir followers. The three collections of Kabir, discussed in chapter two, provide different insights into Kabir's work. Although Hess primarily analyzes Kabir from a literary perspective, she does include a brief discussion of music's place in Kabir, deriving ideas about music from the literature

and historical information. For decades, Hess has been prolific on the topic of Kabir, and her most recent work, forthcoming in late 2014, provides a fresh perspective on Kabir. In this book, entitled *Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India*,[2] Hess looks to the individuals living in the thriving world of Kabir in India as it exists today. Throughout her many years of engagement with Kabir's works, she has come to understand Kabir as more than the texts that he left behind; her new book focuses on the oral traditions of today's Kabir.

David Lorenzen's edited book entitled *Bhakti Religion in North India* (1995) has provided background and supplementary understanding to my investigations of Kabir. While not cited elsewhere in this thesis, Lorenzen along with other scholars (Dass 1991) provide a religious foundation for understanding Kabir's place in the Bhakti movement in India, in addition to much insight into the various religions of North India and Kabir's place within them. Stratton Hawley's *Three Bhakti Voices* (2005) provides a foundation for the understanding of Bhakti and the poet's place in this movement. He contextualizes Kabir, along with two other well-known poets, Mirabai and Surdas. After discussion of the poet-saint in Bhakti thought, he focuses on the individual poet, synthesizing important aspects of each poet's life and works.

In addition to the many other scholars' work on Kabir's poetry in application (largely in religious contexts), there are many collections of poetry referred to throughout this research. To complement the many translations provided in the standard life-and-poetry style texts about Kabir, I consulted many collections of Kabir poetry, such as Winand M. Callewaert's 2000 book *The Millennium Kabīr Vāṇī* and

[2] I owe Linda Hess much gratitude for sharing selections from her forthcoming work with me and lighting the way for my own scholarly engagement with Kabir.

the 1926 original Hindi version *Kabīr Sāheb Ka Bījak* (The Bījak of Kabir). Poetic analysis fell outside of the scope of this project, but a basic understanding of the poetry was necessary for research.

Music was at the heart of this investigation, with a special focus on genre as a concept and folk music as a specific categorization. Trudier Harris's 1995 article entitled "Genre" discusses the benefits and pitfalls of the use of genre in academic studies. Intended to be a classification system, the use of genre helps categorize and describe, creating boundaries between different groups. However, as history has shown, nothing is as stagnant and bounded as the use of genres presumes. In music studies, genre has been broken into subgenres, creating a family tree format for many genres, including their offspring and related musics. My discussion on genre focuses on the category of folk music, since Kabir music is often placed there. Ideas of art music, folk music, and other styles differ from country to country, and even within one country.

Drawing from Ashok Ranade's (1998) designation of the five distinct categories within Indian music—primitive, folk, devotional, art, and popular—through the music of Kabir as a case study, I question the notion of genre as it is used in India today. Sudhibhushan Bhattacharya's (1968) broader categories—cultivated and uncultivated—are less useful in this discussion without again dividing those categories. Carol Babiracki's (1991) conception of great and little musical traditions of India are helpful when conceptualizing the relationship between classical and regional or folk musics in India. In addition to investigating genre in isolation, locating Kabir within the larger musical landscape of India is important. Starting with

basic scholarly sources such as *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and *The Garland Encyclopedia of World* Music, I highlight the lack of definitive writing about Kabir within the musical world and the sonic difficulties that arise when attempting to define it. Using these concepts about genres in India and Kabir's scattered place in India's musical world, I move past the bounded categories of genre to present the larger picture of the music of Kabir.

Goals and Significance

Kabir has been written about predominantly as a historical figure, as a poet, as a religious person, and even as a literary icon. My work is the first to investigate Kabir's work using a musical perspective as the primary focus. There are other works and collections of poetry that recognize the musical attributes of Kabir's work, but most only talk about the music in passing or use musical categories to indicate the presence of music (i.e., organization by *rāga* in some collections of his poetry). Many books related to the subject even contain the word song in their title, though in reality what is discussed is solely lyrical content. Linda Hess's forthcoming book will be a major step forward for the literature on Kabir, providing a more rounded view of Kabir in India today and the oral tradition that surrounds his legacy. Despite Hess's contribution, there is much importance that lies in the discussion of the sonic characteristics and variability of Kabir but is currently absent from Kabir scholarship. This thesis provides a small but important and previously unopened window into the sounds of Kabir, which are of equal importance to the words in many cases. Although I will provide an alternate viewpoint to this very statement later in the thesis, noting that the music can be viewed as a delivery vehicle, and thus the sonic footprint of

these songs is downplayed, the sonic elements are extremely important when considering the dispersion of the ideas through the music and the longevity of this oral tradition. Without emphasis being placed on music, as is done in this thesis, the picture of Kabir that continues today is not a complete one.

In the field of ethnomusicology, other scholars have touched on Kabir as an example in the discussion of Sufi popular music (Manuel 2008), *nirguṇ bhajans* (Henry 1991), and elsewhere. In these works Kabir, and those individuals within the Kabir tradition are not the focus. Presumably the works of Kabir and many other poets and musicians who cross musical lines in India are not studied often for this very reason: they exist in many regions, musical styles, languages, etc., and as such are complex and break from the style-based studies that are common in Indian music (Sanyal and Widdess 2004; Wade 1984) as well as the subject-based studies (Jairazbhoy 1971). Kabir does not work within this framework of a distinct style, region, or sound-grouping, but rather crosses sonically into many contrasting musical styles, ideologically into religious and non-religious realms, and regionally into many regions with a number of different linguistic practices.

Aside from the obvious benefits of new research, my work has sought to answer a number of questions about the music of Kabir and the individuals involved in this culture. What about this old poet made his words so relevant to today? How do musicians take his words and make them their own, and what do the results sound like? Who is part of this Kabir culture of music and ideology, and what draws them to it? Foregrounding the sounds of Kabir in a study on this phenomenon gives new insights into why this poet's works have crossed linguistic, geographic, religious,

class, and so many other boundaries. The importance of the actual sounds of these sung poems have been largely absent from the literature on the subject, where focus has been predominantly placed on the written collection of Kabir, ignoring a very important part of what this phenomenon actually is. For other scholars working both inside and outside of India's borders, the diverse sounds of Kabir should also prove to be a valuable case study for the problematic concept and usage of genre in scholarly discourse as well as popular vernacular.

From previous experience in India, I knew that this was a large topic to investigate in such a short time span. This thesis does not claim to be a comprehensive view of the Kabir tradition as it exists today in North India—that would take far more time and traveling around India than is feasible for the scope of this research. Instead, this thesis discusses in detail some of Kabir's places in modern culture, with an in-depth discussion of specific artists I spent time with in the course of my research. This should serve as a starting point for future musicians investigating the world of Kabir. Chapter one contains an introduction to my journey with Kabir, along with my methodology and goals for this research. Chapter two is a historical grounding, particularly helpful for those unfamiliar with some or all aspects of Kabir's life and the characteristics of his work. Chapter three serves as a contextualization of Kabir's place within Indian music. In addition to problematizing the terms used to categorize the music of Kabir, I discuss many case studies of musical styles within the larger Kabir musical tradition. Chapter four places Kabir in modern life and popular culture in India to illuminate the ways in which Kabir lives

on today. Chapter five, the final chapter, provides concluding thoughts that synthesize the ideas expressed throughout the thesis.

Chapter 2: Kabir's history

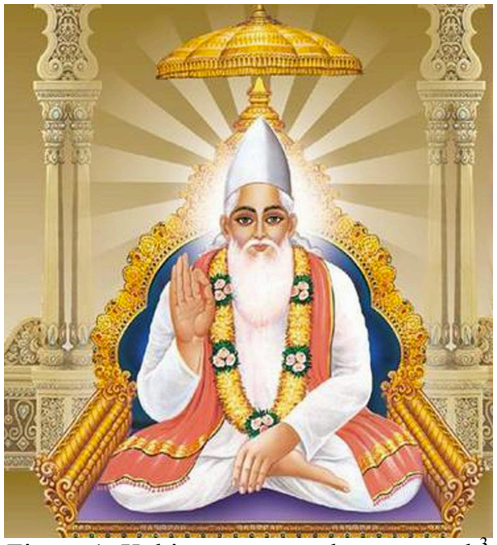

Figure 1: Kabir as commonly portrayed.[3]

Man or Mystic? (Or Something Else?)

The first and most difficult question to answer when considering Kabir and the body of work that lives on via his name is Who was Kabir? Of almost equal importance is the question: Who is Kabir? While these two questions almost seem one and the same, with only a time shift, they are ultimately related yet separate. Although there will never be any certainty on Kabir's life and death, it is generally agreed that he lived from 1398 to 1518 (Dharwadker 2003:1), fantastically and questionably exactly 120 years. Of the many stories that surround his birth, the most plausible is that he was born to a Muslim family of weavers in Banaras (also known as Varanasi). There are at least three other stories that circulate regularly about this birth. One account places Kabir as a child of a Hindu Brahmin family, sometimes thought to be immaculately conceived (likening Kabir to Jesus) and brought forth

[3] Image found at http://bb-hindipoems.blogspot.com/2011/11/hindi-poems-collection-ramdhari-singh.html.

from the palm of his mother's hand (Hess 1983:5), but abandoned at birth and subsequently found and raised by a Muslim family. While this story is also certainly a possibility, it was more likely fabricated as an effort to justify high-caste Hindus' connection with Kabir's ideas and philosophies (Schomer 1987:5). Although India claims religious tolerance and diversity as a key factor in the society, this legend of Kabir's birth points to the existence of much religious strife in India in the past, and this strife is still thriving today. The legend of Kabir is still told in the present, thus reinforcing the division among the religions while making Kabir accessible to high-caste Hindus as well as Muslims.

The numerous remaining legends surrounding Kabir's entrance into the world are far less believable—making Kabir's birth akin to a god-like status. One story claims that he was birthed in a blaze of light over a lake (Dharwadker 2003:20), while another states that he was born from a lotus (*Had Anhad*). These supernatural birth stories give rise to the mystical status afforded to Kabir. Many hold his poetry in high religious regard, so by dehumanizing him through his birth stories, his writings become more transcendent, removing him from the mundane daily life of humans and providing him with a completely supernatural and non-worldly existence. Figure 1 shows a common representation of Kabir sitting cross-legged, with one hand raised and light emanating from around his head.

Knowing Kabir's birth is only a small part of the picture; the remainder of his legacy comes from his physical life as a human and his metaphorical life as a collection of poetry that continues to live beyond his death. In his lifetime, Kabir was a weaver and a poet. He is said to have composed a great number of poems, though

without ever actually using pen and paper, as he is presumed to have been illiterate. Almost mandatory now in writings about Kabir, this famous verse of his is quoted when supporting this argument:

> I don't touch ink or paper,
> this hand never grasped a pen.
> The greatness of four ages
> Kabir tells with his mouth alone
> (Hess and Singh 1983:1)

In any case, Kabir was much more than simply an illiterate weaver or poet during his time and ours. During his time, he was also a part of the greater Bhakti movement—a devotional poetic tradition that emerged in India in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Hawley 2005:1).

The Bhakti movement was focused inward; it was a push for a cultivation of a personal relationship with god, each person in his or her own specific way (Schomer 1987:1). However, within this desire for a connection with an individually conceived god existed definitive ways of thinking: conceptualizations about certain parameters of the poetic tradition serve as possible pathways for individuals during their search for god. The first of these ideas dealt with the notion of the divine as embodied or not. This dichotomy split the poets and followers into two ideological groups—*nirguṇ* and *saguṇ*. Simply put, *nirguṇ* followers are those who worship a divine that is formless and shapeless, more akin to the Islamic vision of Allah, whereas *saguṇ* believers conceptualize a physical deity who is formed with characteristics and attributes (Mitchell 1998:6). Kabir's contemporaries within the *nirguṇ* strand include Guru Nanak (the founder of the Sikh religion) and Dadu, and within the *saguṇ* thread reside Tulsidas, Surdas, and Mirabai, among many others in both categories. While these

two tracks are different, many do not necessarily see them as contradictory to one another, but rather as presenting two different routes one can choose when on a spiritual journey.

The *nirguṇ*/*saguṇ* distinction most certainly exists in scholarly literature about the poets, and even to some extent within the poetry itself, but it may not be as clear a dividing line as many would like to claim it to be. The major distinction often cited between the two groups is one of ideology, the distinction between a shapeless and a physical notion of a deity. This is expressed most explicitly in the texts through the names chosen to refer to god; the *nirguṇ* poets often refer to nature and the self when drawing connections with a shapeless nameless god, while the *saguṇ* poets most often cite Krishna, though sometimes naming Rām as well. In addition, within their works some poets consistently refer to other specific poets, so much so that this tradition helped solidify the existing division (i.e., the *nirguṇ* camp of poets versus the *saguṇ* camp of poets). However, as both Hawley and Schomer point out, this is a problematic division that has only become a concrete idea in fairly recent scholarship (2005:70-88; 1987:3).

Ultimately, I will adhere to the idea of this dichotomy, but it is important to note that there exist many cases of overlap between the two groups within a single poet's works. With this in mind, other scholars and I place Kabir's works in the *nirguṇ* realm. Within the many ideas about Kabir that will be discussed, the perception of Kabir and his persona shifts as he travels to various contexts. He arguably does not fully cross over between the *nirguṇ*/*saguṇ* distinction, but

understanding the thin line that exists between them will help the reader understand the fluidity in the larger Bhakti tradition that Kabir flourished within.

The Poetic Tradition

It is true that Kabir was only one part of this larger poetic tradition, and as will be made clear later, this is important. Despite his membership in this poetic collective, he stands alone among his peers due to his poetic style. When discussing the style of Kabir's writing, a number of difficulties arise. Due to the vast collection of Kabir poetry, his work spans many languages of composition (none of which are known to be English) and reproduction. So, working primarily from translations is a disadvantage when discussing one of the reasons Kabir was so important and influential in his time—his poetic voice. My research focused more on sounds than on text, but understanding the text is key to finding answers to questions that prompted my interest in the topic. Although most members of the tradition are native Hindi speakers in North India, depending on an individual's performer preference, Hindi knowledge alone is not enough and insiders to this tradition will often be dealing with meaning from a translation or third party, as in common in the performance style of Prahladji and other folk artists (as discussed in chapter three).

Another complication faced when discussing this style is the existence of more than one *parampara*, or tradition. In this context, *parampara* means a collection of Kabir's works that are generally seen as a distinct strand of Kabir's writings. There are three widely accepted *parampara* in the Kabir tradition: the northern, the western, and the eastern. Although these traditions are traced back as related yet distinct, the eastern tradition is generally considered to be the outlier of the group, and

occasionally the northern and western traditions are referred to as one larger tradition—confusingly, called the western tradition. Just as complicated is the issue of untangling who Kabir was and is—the narratives that exist around the traditions are overlapping and often contradictory. The more inclusive western tradition (containing both the western and the northern) shows a different color of Kabir from its eastern counterpart. That is, the western *parampara* shows Kabir to be a bit softer, more devotional, and less biting and aggressive. Additionally, while none of the three collections have total, or even much, overlap in content (something that is an indication of the largely oral nature of this tradition), the northern and western traditions are more closely related, with more poems in common with each other than with the eastern tradition (Hess 1987:113).[4]

In addition to the textual and emotional overlapping of the two traditions that make up the larger western tradition, there is a similar treatment of musical context within the written text itself as compared to the eastern tradition. For example, within the physical collection associated with the northern tradition, the *Adī Granth*, the main part of the book is divided into sections organized by the *rāga* or *rāgini* to which the poetry is set (Dharwadker 2003:48). In this collection, the specific author is not central to the organizational structure, but rather the focus is first placed on the poetic and musical characteristics. The texts used in the western tradition—the *pañchavāṇī*-style manuscripts such as the *Kabīr Granthāvalī*—are first arranged by poet, and then by *rāga* or *rāgini*, and even along thematic lines to a degree (ibid.:50). Even though they are not the first feature considered when structuring the text,

[4] In fact, it appears no single poem attributed to Kabir exists in all the written/printed-text sources (Dharwadker 2003:57).

musical divisions still surface in this text. However, within the organization of the eastern text, the *Bījak*, there is no musical context at all. The poems are actually ordered in a semi-alphabetical manner, though this is more of a grouping than a true alphabetical format. All of the musical information found in both the *Adī Granth* and the *Kabīr Granthāvalī* consists of simple suggestions and organizational schemes. The poems can be set to any number of musical styles, with a few exceptions that would be considered unacceptable by most. (A musical grouping like film music would fall into this category.) The musical choices made regarding Kabir's works come from the oral traditions and regional practices that thrive throughout India.

I first learned of Kabir from the eastern tradition, through the *Bījak*—the sacred book of the Kabir Panth. While some would say that this is the outlier of Kabir's style and thoughts, I argue that it is all a matter of perspective. For those members of the Kabir Panth, this is both a genuine and believable Kabir. This is a Kabir whose thoughts are sharp, with harsh words that criticize organized religion and call attention to social problems. He points out the flaws that pervade the individual while charging that same individual to look to him or herself, purporting that the answers we are looking for can be found inside. This Kabir declares that god resides in all of us, that we only need to look inward to find this truth that has been within us all along (Hess and Singh 1983:5). This Kabir also tends to be very intellectual in language; his poetry is filled with riddles and negation, involving listeners by requiring active listening, rather than using straightforward messages that allow for passive listening.

Others, like those who are more accustomed to the western tradition, think of the more devotional Kabir as the truly authentic Kabir. This Kabir tends to be less critical in his approach, and more emotional, embodying what Linda Hess calls the "bhakti feeling and language" (1987:117). This style incorporates a writing that is infused with names for god that are linked with personal worship and individual zeal. Additionally, these poems tend to display emotions not typically expressed in the same manner in the eastern style, such as the emotional surrender in relationships involving a servant, child, lover, etc. (ibid.).

The differing language, style, and content in the three traditions point to the living (and thus changeable) nature of the poetry and the thoughts themselves. While Kabir did not actually write his compositions down, he likely sang and transmitted them orally, as would have been a customary practice at this time. This is important because during Kabir's life, and in the continuation of his teachings after his death, his audience has largely consisted of a group of listeners, not readers. It is generally agreed that the *Ādi Granth,* the sacred book of the Sikhs containing a collection of Kabir works, is the earliest written compilation of Kabir poetry, nearly a century after his presumed death date (Hess 1987:112). The collected poems of Kabir are therefore sure to contain inflections of others' voices as well as Kabir's original voice, whatever that may have been. It is difficult to attribute individual linguistic choices to either Kabir or the influence of others, but perhaps to fixate on this detail misses the point of Kabir and his words entirely.

Kabir is important not because of who he was or even because of what he said at the time; Kabir is important because of how he connects with so many individuals.

Through Kabir's many rhetoric styles, he has the ability to provoke some while pacifying others. His vast collection of poems has the capability to reach people through different languages and dialects, in different locations, from different religious backgrounds. Kabir has the ability to truly transcend boundaries. This is not to be mistaken for bringing different groups together. Many (like Muhammad Hedayetullah in his book *Kabir: The Apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity*) champion Kabir as the unifier of different religions. However, I read Kabir's words not as an attempt to unify the two religions, but rather to point to fundamental flaws that exist within both, and in all religions, for that matter. Kabir uses his poetry to question the very concept of organized religion rather than attempting to offer a solution for the conflicts that have existed between Hindus and Muslims for ages.

Just as the social divisions of India's past (and present) cut across religious boundaries, Kabir also exists within the realms of Hinduism, Islam, and other religions. Assuming that the birth story that appeals to many scholars and some groups of believers is most plausible (as mentioned by Dharwadker 2003, Westcott 1907, and others), then Kabir was not of noble or particularly high birth or status, as he was raised in a weaver's household, and the struggles in his own life have helped find his strong and influential poetry a home in the undervalued communities in India in the past and present. Today, Kabir is universally viewed as an icon for the poor and oppressed; he holds a particularly special place in the lower classes in India, like the Dalit group (previously known by the name "untouchables"). These individuals are often drawn to Kabir for his criticism of the religious and caste systems that are the root of the inequality in their lives. Even though his struggles are textually

represented differently through the different traditions, Kabir's vocality as a figure who is no stranger to life's challenges helps maintain his prominence in Indian society even today.

Kabir's importance today is not only due to his iconic and mystic status; rather, his longevity can be traced to a much more practical feature of the tradition that we call Kabir—the loosely defined notion of Kabir as an author. It is agreed that Kabir composed and sang his own compositions; however, the body of work in existence today that is attributed to Kabir cannot possibly all come from Kabir. Many scholars throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have recognized that it is an impossibility partly because of the quantity of poems: over 6,000 distinct compositions according to Parasanath Tivari, although this is only one estimate (Dharwadker 2003:53). The variation that exists across *all* of the works attributed to Kabir also points to the probability of joint authorship (ibid.:59). Additionally, since it is assumed that Kabir never physically wrote any of his own compositions down, and it is likely the recording of his works did not begin to happen to any significant degree until nearly a century after his death, his works have gone through the inevitable mediation of numerous other individuals, religious organizations, and even commercial enterprises.[5]

Beyond this mediation, there was also an idea of collective authorship during this time in Indian history. In fact, when one becomes a *bhakta*—that is, a devotee (male) who has fully committed himself to worship of a particular god—generally

[5] There is some disagreement among scholars as to when written accounts of his works began emerging; however, for a larger-scale record, it is agreed the *Ādi Granth* is the first appearance.

one also becomes attached to a guru and simultaneously becomes part of a community of devotees like himself.[6] Within this collective mentality, when an individual joins the group, he or she may now in essence speak for the group when speaking as a poet, and at the same time the group also now effectively speaks for the individual as well. If a history of this practice alone is not a thoroughly convincing argument for the idea that Kabir's works cannot be solely attributed to him alone, there is also a famous recorded instance of Guru Arjan composing a poem with Kabir's signature line—successfully marking it as Kabir's (Dharwadker 2003:61, citing Dass 1991 and Singh 2000).

Kabir's signature line is an important feature in his poems. Toward the end of most (but not all) of his poems, Kabir signs off with a variation of *kahe kabīr* ("says Kabir"). In the majority of his poems, he refers to himself in the third person toward the end, signing off with the idea that through his poems he has said something to or asked something of the listener ("says Kabir," "asks Kabir," etc.). Often, his line even goes on to express a larger version of this idea, *kaheṅ kabīr suno bhāī sādho* ("says Kabir, listen brother, seeker"), where he not only emphasizes that these words are what *he* is saying, but at the same time urges the audience to listen as well. Kabir's signature line (or some variant) is so prevalent in his works that it effectively works as a marker in attributing poems to him.

Due to the prevalence of Kabir's signature line, realistically anyone could easily compose a poem with his signature line included and attempt pass it off as Kabir's, although it is doubtful that it would stand the test of time if it did not fit into

[6] The term *bhakta* is generally used when talking about the *saguṇ* tradition, whereas *sant* is used within the *nirguṇ* discourse, but as we have already mentioned, that distinction may not be as clear as it is conceived to be.

the larger line of thought and style associated with Kabir within at least one of the traditions. As a result, we must assume that Kabir's identity is not the identity of one human presumed to have lived more than five hundred years ago, but is rather the identity shaped by many people from various times and regions, spanning the centuries from Kabir's time to the present. Every time a new scholar writes about Kabir, a new translation of poetry is published, or a new collection is assembled, the identity of Kabir—who he was in his time and who he is in our time—is molded and altered, sometimes slightly, sometimes significantly.

Modern-Day Kabir

The Kabir Project, an undertaking started in 2003 by filmmaker Shabnam Virmani, has reintroduced and reshaped Kabir over the past decade for many youth and adults across India, even crossing borders into Pakistan and the United States, and perhaps to other locales as well. Through her venture and collaboration with many musicians, scholars, historians, and others, she and her team created four films that explore various aspects of Kabir. Along with these films, the Kabir project produced six audio CDs with accompanying poetry books. It was through one of these CDs that I first encountered Kabir.

More important to my introduction to Kabir through these books is the present-day example of a collection of different poets represented by Kabir's name alone. In looking at one of the poetry books entitled *Ghat Ghat Kabir* (In Every Body Kabir), there are many poems attributed to Kabir (noted not by his signature line, but rather by his name beneath the title of the poem). In addition to this, poems by Baba Shaheen Shah, Ganga Das, Dharamdas, and others are also included in the same

book. However, the title of the book only refers to Kabir; Kabir's identity and name in the title of the book encompass all of the poets. Even in public performances, artists will be advertised as singing Kabir works, but in reality the works they are singing are both Kabir and Kabir-like, fitting in with his larger body of work but not actually composed by him.

Metaphorically, Kabir lives today just as he lived in the past. His importance today is arguably less than it was in his lifetime; however, he has survived the test of time (with a handful of other poets) while many have faded into the past. This is partly due to Kabir's integration into the grade school curriculum in North India that helped to focus awareness on his works. While at a Kabir workshop with folk singer Prahlad Tipanya, I asked other participants when they first came to know of Kabir. Almost all of the fourteen participants questioned noted that they first came across Kabir *dohās* in their childhood days through the study of poetry in the schools of India.

Kabir's Canon

The *dohā* (*sākhī*), *pada* (sometimes also called *shabd*), and *ramainī* are the most common poetic forms found throughout the Kabir canon. Similar to the variance within tradition as a whole, some terms are used in some regions within the tradition, while a different word is used in other locations. The *dohā* or *sākhī* can be thought of as a rhyming couplet, often with end-rhymes, similar to the heroic couplet in English poetry. The end rhyming occurs in the printed Hindi records of the texts, but this often does not often translate well into a rhyming scheme in English.

Sākhī 24, from the *Bījak*:

Color is born of color.	*Ranghi se rang ūpjai,*
I see all colors one.	*sab rang dekha ek.*
What color is a living creature?	*Kaun rang hai jīvakā,*
Solve it if you can.	*tākar karhu vibek.*
(Hess and Singh 1983:92)	(*Kabīr* 1926:91)

Pada literally means verse, poem, or song. This word can refer to a single verse or an entire poem, but in the context of the Kabir canon it generally is used to refer to an entire poem. Occasionally the word *shabd,* meaning word, sound, speech, or discourse, is used (generally in the northern tradition). Although commonly used patterns exist, the *pada* or *shabd* does not have a strict set form like the *dohā*, and thus vary in length and meter.

Pada 41, from the *Bījak*:

Pandit, look in your heart for knowledge.
Tell me where untouchability
came from, since you believe in it.
Mix red juice, white juice and air–
A body bakes in a body.
As soon as the eight lotuses
are ready, it comes
into the world. Then what's
untouchable?
Eighty-four hundred thousand vessels
decay into dust, while the potter
keeps slapping clay
on the wheel, and with a touch
cuts each one off.
We eat by touching, we wash
by touching, from a touch
the world was born.
So who's untouched? asks Kabir.
Only he
who has no taint of Maya.
(Hess and Singh 1983:55)

The third and least commonly found type of poetic form found in the Kabir texts is the *ramainī*. This form is predominantly found in the eastern tradition, in the *Bījak*, and is also found in the western tradition; however, it is missing from the northern tradition entirely. The *ramainī* is made up of two parts, with a stricter format in which the majority of lines are in the *dohā*-style format while the concluding line is in *chaupāī* form (a four-lined rhyme verse):

Ramainī 15, from the *Kabīr Granthāvalī*:

> Joy is brief.
> Sorrow and grief are endless.
> The mind's an elephant,
> mad, amnesiac.
>
> Air and flame burn as one,
> just as when the most, its eye enchanted by light,
> flies straight into the lamp,
> and wing and fire flare together.
>
> Who hasn't found
> restful peace in a moment of pleasure?
> So you brush aside the truth,
> and chase the lies you hold so dear.
>
> At the end of your days
> you feel the temptation, you covet joy,
> even though old age and death
> are close at hand.
>
> The world's embroiled in illusion, error:
> this is the process always in motion.
> Man attains a human birth:
> why does he waste and destroy it?
> (Dharwadker 2003:151)

Through this very small sampling of Kabir's words, an image of a strong outspoken man emerges. Given a different sampling of text, a different picture might

develop, as is common within the diverse Kabir tradition. His works target a number of topical concerns, but they largely deal with life, death, religion, the body, social criticisms, and his own spiritual awakening. Weaving imagery is also very common, as Kabir was first and foremost a weaver during his lifetime. His texts are interpreted in a number of different ways; this allows for individuals to connect to any texts, while religious organizations utilize specific spiritual texts for their institutional benefit. In general, his texts refer to specific subjects, but as is true with all poetry, the difference between what the poem says and what it is actually about relies completely on individual understanding; without an insight into the poetic meaning, an author's desired meaning may go undetected.

It would be difficult to compile a truly comprehensive collection of Kabir, inclusive of the many collections in existence across all of the languages in which Kabir lives. In his 2003 book, Vinay Dharwadker attempts to show a very small but balanced view of Kabir through the eyes of the many traditions; however, his collection does not include any full original-language texts. His collection, like that of the English translation *Bījak*, does retain the original numberings, so it is possible to find the original texts and match the translations. Even the very large, comprehensive collection of *padas* by Winand M. Callewaert only includes *padas*, and although it includes an English introduction and critical comparisons between the texts, it includes only Hindi versions of all of the works. Language is only one of the problems faced in every Kabir collection, and this continues to make a comprehensive view difficult; beyond language, word variance, completeness, and of course authenticity issues complicate this project.

The Kabir poets—a collection of writers, philosophers, poets, academics, and others, spanning centuries—continue Kabir's legacy to the present day. However, to say that Kabir is a collection of poems (implying a written-based tradition) is to lose one of the central characteristics of what Kabir is today. It is true that many in India first come into contact with Kabir in childhood through his written *dohās*, and this is a part of the existence of Kabir today, but much more important is the way in which Kabir lives orally and is transmitted in numerous contexts to a variety of audiences all over India and outside of India as well. Kabir's thoughts and ideas have survived over 500 years and they continue to captivate listeners through the written and sonic versions of Kabir. But like everything else complicated about Kabir, the musical vehicle for Kabir's words is the same: diverse, often contradictory, and with a meaning that is distinctly different from individual to individual.

Chapter 3: The Sounds of Kabir

The Place of Kabir in Indian Music

The importance of knowing who Kabir is transcends knowing the history of Kabir or facts about his personal views. The real meaning of Kabir comes from the interaction between the individual and the Kabir text—whether it be in written form or, more likely, in sonic form. The many aural shapes that Kabir embodies allow for a wide listener audience and thus lay the foundation for widespread knowledge of Kabir.

Indian music is not a single entity that can easily be expressed or described succinctly in words or through sounds. Kabir is no exception to this statement. Kabir's music spans not only time, but genre as well. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (online) does not have a separate category for Kabir, but he shows up briefly in many different sections. This is due to two main factors: the lack of a "Kabir genre" per se and the multi-author nature of the dictionary. When writing the various parts of the Indian music entry, authors add in musical styles and mention individuals that are associated with those styles according to their own understandings. This, and the impossibility of reaching a consensus on a clearly defined sense of genre, is primarily why Kabir is only mentioned under various subheadings in the entry. Kabir first shows up under the "Devotional Songs and Musical Form" section, beneath the "Devotional Poetry in North India" subsection (Qureshi n.d.). He is listed here as a devotional poet, with no discussion around what

his devotional poetry sounds like. Additionally, Kabir is included in the "Religious Music" section as an example of the sonic blending of Sufi and Hindu concepts (Simon n.d.). He is not mentioned in the semi-classical genre discussion; while this section does not exclude him explicitly, it does not imply his inclusion either. This also holds true for other styles outside of the devotional/religious realms.

It would not be reasonable to expect any musician/musical contributor to show up in every context in which they could possibly be discussed, but it is notable that Kabir only surfaces in categories surrounding religion or poetry. Even in the "Local Traditions" section, Kabir again makes an appearance in connection to *nirguṇ bhajans* (Henry n.d.). A *bhajan* is a praise or devotional song, sung in the context of worship. *Bhajans* are also mentioned in the film music section (Arnold n.d.; Manuel n.d.), acknowledging the space for religious music in the widely popular Hindi film music, and one could make an argument to include Kabir as well. Peter Manuel elaborates on the pop *bhajan* as a song type in popular culture (and by extension film music) in his 1993 book *Cassette Culture*.

Even in the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, Kabir only appears in passing, as an example of a poet-saint (Henry and Marcus 1999:660) or when discussing *nirguṇ bhajans* (Beck 1999:253)—essentially in the same contexts as the Grove entries. *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Music of India* is an exception, since it is solely centered on India; in fact, it has an entire entry on Kabir. Despite this entry in an encyclopedia of music, the sounds of Kabir are not discussed at length; instead, his background and its relationship to the Hindu/Muslim tension in the region are highlighted. Interestingly, the word "lyrics" is used when an example of his poetry is

given and in the one sentence discussing sonic qualities, with the author stating that his "lyrics are all sung in different *rāgas* according to the choice of the devotees" (Ghosh 2011:492). Despite not having a clear sonic concept of what this sound is, the words of Kabir are clearly musical.

While not explicitly a part of daily life for some, Kabir has the ability to blend into many environments and attract listeners of many social classes, religions, and ages. The distinguishing characteristic common to all of this "Kabir music," as I will refer to the grouping, is ideology. The sonic qualities are not the threads that link his genre; rather, the unifying thread is Kabir's thoughts. The same can be said for the entire genre of devotional poetry, particularly in the Bhakti movement. These texts are all connected by their authors' ideas, not the manner in which people perpetuate these ideas aurally. While style matters for an individual listener and a specific market, the sound is not the most important feature of the poetry. This concept is echoed by religious figures, notably Guru Ramdas of the Sikh tradition, who recognizes the musical organization of the *Ādi Granth* but highlights the music as a delivery tool, not the focus (Dharwadker 2003:49). Similar to much music that is grouped along ideological threads (worship music, protest music), the content is of prime importance and the sounds serve to disseminate those ideas.

As discussed by other scholars in their comparisons of different texts (Hess 1987; Dharwadker 2003), Kabir's work lives simultaneously in many regions; this travel across physical location is one factor in the numerous differences in the written texts. Although not highly visible on paper, the oral tradition of Kabir from state to state also helps produce many variations on what music scholars conceive of as a

musical piece or work. In the case of the US folksong "Barbra Allen," the sonic qualities and the storyline are the strings tying the different forms together today, constituting the "work" in all its various renditions (Seeger 1977b). In contrast, the different versions of Kabir works are held together not by sonic threads, but by textual ones. This concept of a work in the Kabir tradition derives from the poetry first and foremost.[7] The text of Kabir lives in an oral space and thus grows and changes with the linguistic and regional musical differences of each place where the Kabir tradition thrives.

Folk Music

Undoubtedly, folk music is a musical genre that exists worldwide, although the term can still be problematic in many contexts. The issue stems not from the word alone, but from the use of the term. Despite the many definitions that exist in music encyclopedias, scholarly articles, and general dictionaries, there is no real consensus on the term folk music or what it implies in today's world of music. When investigating at the most basic level, in the *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, one quickly discovers that even here, folk music has a very specific meaning that does not apply to some cultures. This definition places importance on the oral nature of folk songs and suggests that unknown authorship is common, but moves into a Western focus, specifically citing cases in Western and Eastern Europe. Historically speaking, "folk" as a term developed for the individuals of nations, or simply the people, originating from the German "*Volk*." Over time, this grew into a definition associated more

[7] There is variance within the text, but it is generally far less extensive than the possible sonic variations between two musicians, especially musicians from different regions and musical backgrounds.

strictly with class, separating the elite from the common—similar to the schism between European art music and popular genres (which included practically anything that fell outside of the art realm). While folk perhaps did not begin as a term that evoked lower class, it has quickly come to imply a lesser level of education, perhaps because of the largely oral nature of a genre such as folk music. In fact, in 1954 the International Folk Music Council (IFMC) tried to define this elusive term during its World Conference, and finally settled on a brief definition, acknowledging that despite their best efforts, not all members were satisfied. This definition stated that, "folk music is music that has been submitted to the process of oral transmission. It is the product of evolution and is dependent on the circumstances of continuity, variation and selection" (Karpeles 1955:6). Of course, orality is not an acceptable distinguishing feature for the classification of folk music, since all music has orality as a feature to varying degree, especially within Indian musical traditions. As is discussed later, folk music classifications by individuals from various groups in India are based on instruments used, region of origin, and language more frequently than on considerations of orality.

The IFMC somewhat problematically recognized orality as one of the most distinguishing characteristics of folk music, and to this day this connection persists. However, the term has taken on a more negative connotation as well. Despite efforts to convey folk music as a straightforward idea of music coming from the folk, this admittedly largely inclusive concept has not achieved widespread acceptance. In his article "The Folkness of the Nonfolk and the Nonfolkness of the Folk," Charles Seeger appropriately identifies the problems that surround the folk music concept as

stemming from a larger debate over the word folk itself and its connection with class. While it seems that the controversy in music is a byproduct of a larger cultural disagreement, Seeger affirms that, at least musically speaking, the US population consists of two groups: "a majority that does not know it is a folk; a minority, that thinks it isn't" (Seeger 1977a:343). Simply put, we are all folk, despite our best effort to separate ourselves from the masses.

Despite this acknowledgement of the difference between folk music as a term in practice and in theory, in 1981 the IFMC officially changed its name to the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) over the growing concern around "folk" as a concept and term; "traditional" is a much more inclusive term, and thus is not as problematic as the term "folk" when applied to many of the classical or court traditions existing in some Asian countries that are represented in the society (personal communication, J. Lawrence Witzleben, 2013). This rebranding highlighted the issues that are prevalent with the folk concept in the United States and the implications that stretch beyond those borders and into other cultures around the globe. The connection with oral tradition is still a common trait of folk music genres in many rural areas inside and outside of the West. Despite the occasional synonymous use of "traditional" and "folk," there is in fact a difference between the terms. Despite similar theoretical conception, in popular and academic culture the word traditional seems less controversial and more widely accepted (although still contested in some cases); "traditional" appears to shed some of the negative undertones of "folk."

While this discussion of the two terms in relation to one another is important, it is not the focus of this chapter and should be explored in a separate context. For Kabir, the importance of this discourse lies within the term "folk music," mainly because it is one of the two descriptors most often associated with this music. The art/other music divide exists in India just as it does in most cultures with a "classical" tradition of some variety. This divide continues to hold Kabir in the non-classical, non-elite world, associating him with the folk. In addition to this, Kabir's poetry criticizes the ruling classes and religious authority figures; this subversion, in conjunction with the overwhelming regional flavor of the majority of Kabir's works in society, continues to place Kabir in the realm of the people, the everyman. However, the term "folk music" alone does not adequately express the variety of renditions of his works and their place in popular culture. The occasional negative connotations associated with folk music attempt to erect a wall between the modern cosmopolitan world of India and the music of Kabir.

Inside and outside of India, opinions differ on the number of categories of Indian music, and what those categories include. For many scholars, the division between art music (classical) and others (folk, tribal, and more) exists. For these individuals, the distinction is quite clear: there is "cultivated" music, and there is "uncultivated" music (Bhattacharya 1968); there are art, primitive, folk, devotional, and popular musics (Ranade 1998). Regardless of the divisions, art music is in a category wholly separate from the other musical styles, often regarded as superior. Despite his distinction between art, folk, and primitive musical styles, Ranade notes the proximity that folk has to art music in different places throughout history

(1998:14), highlighting a dialogism between the different traditions. Despite this concession of influence from one category to another (in a number of directions), Ranade discusses characteristics for each of the musical styles. He pinpoints the sonic centrality of the voice while placing social importance on collectivity in Indian folk music (1998:8). For other scholars on a similar line of thinking, this division is even less clearly defined, and should be viewed as a continuum, or the various types of music should be treated as related instead of as distinct categories (Babiracki 1991; Baké 1937). This is not to say that the musics should be viewed as evolving from one to another, but rather that they coexist and draw upon each other in different ways, and that the traditions are less distinctly unique than often perceived. No categorization scheme will be satisfactory for all; the importance here lies in the recognition that the genres as they exist in practice and in theory are ambiguous and should not be strictly conceptualized in these bounded categories. Still, although it may not be easily defined, the distinction between the art musics of Indian and "other" musics is real in popular thought.

The other, equally controversial, term often used to describe this poetry/music of Kabir is "devotional poetry." This labeling again restricts Kabir to a certain box and corners him in the world of the religious. Interpretations of Kabir's thoughts are undeniably different for each person who personally finds Kabir, but it appears to me that placing Kabir within a strictly religious realm goes against his message. The conventions of most religions include a named divine (or multiple divines) that is the ultimate truth, placing the emphasis on devotion and the connection between the individual and those higher powers. Kabir urges individuals to look inside themselves

for a guru, to look within for the ultimate truth that each of us holds. According to the interpretation of Prahlad Tipanya, one of the best-known living proponents of Kabir, the guru that lies within each of us is our experience. We must live life and constantly look inward to comprehend the world around us. But, most importantly, self-understanding is the emphasis here (workshop with Prahlad Tipanya, January 2014). These two labels—folk music and devotional poetry—could be talked about at great length independently. For now, the focus will fall on the category most explicitly related to sonic qualities: folk music.

If the folk term were repurposed and repackaged to mean what it literally means—of the people—the music might enjoy greater reception in society. Investigating the nature of genre and how it allows scholars to classify a range of items, from music to local expression to living creatures and beyond, it is clear that genre as a concept is practical. With this practical application comes another slew of problems and limitations. In the context of genre in folkloric studies, Trudier Harris comments on the boundaries erected by genre; the solution, or at least current practice, is to subdivide genres, creating new subgenres to allow for the variations according to local contexts, transmission, multiple meanings, and uses in daily life. Applying this line of thinking to a musical genre, Harris examines the blues and identifies three subgenres: country blues, city/classic blues, and urban blues. After this, regional considerations must be taken into consideration, subdividing the music into more subgenres including the Delta, Memphis, Chicago, and Durham blues (1995:511-12). The process can continue indefinitely.

I am not alone in recognizing the need for a different understanding of genre in scholarly and popular discourse; other scholars have written on the topic (for perspectives drawing from anthropology, folklore, linguistics, and more, see Briggs and Bauman 1992 and Bauman 1999). Aside from the possibility of infinite divisions, genre labels, like written texts, often solidify a musical style as one idea, sound, or sentiment and do not provide adequate descriptors for the cross-pollination that occurs within real-life musical realms. The intertextual nature of all musical works creates a space for different musics—including their sonic, human, technological, and cultural aspects—to meet, interact, and continue in a way that is modified to some extent. Genres, as stagnant bounded categories, do not accurately represent the new forms of existing traditions that do not fit nicely into one of the pre-established boxes. The problems inherent in genre are huge, but for my purposes I will focus only on the folk music genre.

Folk music definitions are rooted in orality. The practice of oral traditions grew from a place inhabited by the uneducated masses, of those who could not read and were not of an elevated class, by high society's standards. This link that developed between low-classes and folklore has been sustained for many centuries and, in the wake of technology and mass-education, leaves a negative residue on many wholly changed traditions. What happens when oral works meet pen and paper? Cassettes, CDs, and MP3s? Are they still oral? The short answer is yes. Works are still performed and passed along, changed by individuals and communities to meet the needs of those in that time. The characteristics that lie in oral traditions still exist, but the mode of transmission has evolved. But it is just that—evolution, not

replacement. Often, in the case of folk music, as with Kabir, the introduction of a new medium does not eliminate the old. In her forthcoming book *Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India*, Linda Hess points out the likely culprit behind this misconception: scholarly discourse and the dichotomization of written and oral traditions. Hess insightfully highlights the effects of new technology on transmission and dissemination techniques, but is careful to affirm the still existing oral qualities of the tradition as well. The problem, then, lies not with scholarly understanding of the interplay between oral and written traditions, but rather with the vocabulary used to discuss this intersection and the traditions already existing fully inside this liminal space.

As an alternative to diving into the Pandora's box of subgenres, I suggest a colorization of the category "folk music" to help explain the Kabir tradition in the modern world, rooted in the people and ideas across time, location, and technology. To call the music existing in the Kabir tradition "living folk music" implies a connection to life, both past and present, still rooted in orality. The terms "folk music" or "traditional music" occasionally conjure up an image of a music that is out of date, and thus irrelevant to many today, particularly for the cosmopolitan youth entrenched in mainstream popular culture. The image of Kabir's music as living folk music combats this idea of an ancient, unchanging art through the reinforcement of a currently living creature. As an entity, living folk music has the ability to change and grow; as the name implies, it is alive. However, it is still rooted in music that is by and for the people, rather than a mass-produced product to be consumed by all and "owned" (culturally, financially) by few. The emphasis placed on the word living

alludes to the changing and variable nature of these works. The tradition of Kabir lives in many spheres at once. What was once an oral art form now thrives in oral, written, and recorded forms and the many intermediaries that exist between these states.

My goal here is not to create a new term for the music community at large or even to delve too deeply into the terminology. Charles Seeger cautions us not to get into arguments over what is folk and what is not folk music (Minzesheimer 2014), and along that same thinking, the definition and categorization of folk music here is not the most important point; my aim is to reveal Kabir's musical world to those unfamiliar with it. Short of singing and playing, impossible to do through my written words, starting with a frame of reference is the best approach to provide sonic and ultimately thematic and cultural understanding of Kabir's work. Sonically speaking, the difficulty of providing a frame of reference cannot be overstated, as already demonstrated when trying to place the music of Kabir into an existing genre.

Kabir's Sounds

Folk, poetic, and devotional: these are the words that most often come to mind and are brought up in conversation when describing the music of Kabir. Occasionally, the label semi-classical will even be used to describe some Kabir works, though this is usually said with a specific singer/performer in mind rather than describing the genre as a whole. Although one almost never hears the word classical in association with Kabir (and truthfully, it is not most common for Kabir works to be performed in classical styles), it is still done. Ten musicians contributed to the first Kabir CD and poetry set I stumbled across, *Ghat Ghat Kabir*. Of these ten, six of the artists' short

blurbs mentioned folk music in some variation. One artist uses "folk idiom with refined classicism" when singing Kabir poetry, another "represents a hypnotic folk style," while yet another's style is described as "highly classical yet distinctly folk" (Jain and Virmani 2008:5, 51, 45). The other performers' styles range from light classical to rare classical styles to *qawwali* with a fusion of classical genres. Yet even in the face of clear examples of Kabir in classical form, this is rarely discussed, and the classical seems out of place in many contexts where Kabir is performed.

Kabir's tight relationship with non-classical forms stems from the instruments and musical styles most often used, along with the association of Kabir's philosophy with the lower classes in India and the strict divide of the classes carried into the musical realm. While this is changing today, with Kabir appearing in more classical and popular forms throughout India, it is still not obvious to connect Kabir with classical music. The expression I use to elaborate on Kabir's sound—living folk music—admittedly does not aid in broadening of Kabir's place in the classical world, but rather only affirms the ties between Kabir and the folk. This is a shortcoming of the phrase, certainly, but I argue that trained professionals produce the classical music of Kabir and that the music is still intended for the public, not a musically educated elite. This still retains part of the nature of folk music, defined as music by and for the folk. Kabir's message is intended for all, regardless of the vehicle used to transport it.

Prahlad Tipanya

The village of Lunyakhedi, Madhya Pradesh, has seen many travelers come and go in search of the mysterious Kabir. The year 2013 was no exception to this now-established tradition. Tourism in India is no new thing; however, Lunyakhedi is

much off the beaten track and difficult to reach. The influx of tourism there comes from travelers who are not in search of a typical tourist site like the Taj Mahal of Agra or Baha'i Lotus temple of Delhi, but rather attempting to find a version of Kabir that permeates the area. Arguably the best-known Kabir folk musician (and perhaps best-known living Kabir musician of any style) is Prahlad Tipanya, currently living in the sleepy Madhya Pradesh village. A schoolteacher by profession, Prahladji is publically known for his avid teaching and spreading of Kabir's philosophy all over India and beyond. Prahladji regularly hosts workshops and *yatras* (literally meaning trips, but in this context meaning music trips dedicated to Kabir) in Madhya Pradesh to share his knowledge and interpretation of Kabir through conversation and song.

Figure 2: Prahlad Tipanya at a workshop in August 2013.[8]

[8] Photograph taken by Chaitanya Sharma.

Prahladji's style sonically falls within the folk genre. His use of *tanpura* (a long-necked lute, used as a rhythmic drone), *manjira* (small finger cymbals), *kartal* (rhythmic instrument made of two blocks of wood, generally with copper plates for rattles, similar to the sound of a tambourine), *dholak* (barrel hand drum, originating in the Punjabi region, but now common throughout folk styles across India), and occasionally the harmonium (small pump-reed organ) and violin combined with group singing mark Prahladji's sound as folk. In addition to the folk label implied by the instruments, the lack of written musical notation also aids in this classification. Poetic texts (as discussed in chapter one) do exist and are referred to frequently during renditions of Kabir works by a number of singers, though often they are simply a memory aid since the words live within the performers' heads. Despite this association with folk music (through performance practice, instruments, and sonic quality), when questioned about musical genre participants in Prahladji's August 2013 workshop did not give the straightforward "folk music" (or *lok sangīt*) answer when pressed to classify Kabir music (interviews, workshop participants, 2013), but rather argued that Kabir cannot be bounded and put into a solitary category. They stress the fluidity of Kabir's words and sounds; the words have been shaped to fit the communities that Kabir's ideas exist in, so they sonically grow and blossom according to the individual community's musical and linguistic preferences.

Throughout the course of the August 2013 workshop, participants sang many songs, most only one time. However, due to the preferences of both participants and musicians (Prahladji and his ensemble), the group repeated select works multiple times. Perhaps it was the meaning behind the text, the sounds of the words

themselves, or simply the stark difference between this song and the other songs encountered during the workshop, but whatever the reason, "Pancchīdā Bhāī" stood out among this group of songs. The song's beauty struck me within the first few notes of the haunting violin melody.

This melody, transcribed (and transposed down a tritone) in figure 3, is the only melodic material used throughout the piece. First played on the violin, it then becomes the vocal melody line as well, occasionally with violin doubling and sometimes featuring a call-and-response with the singers using the same melodic phrase or a derivative of it.

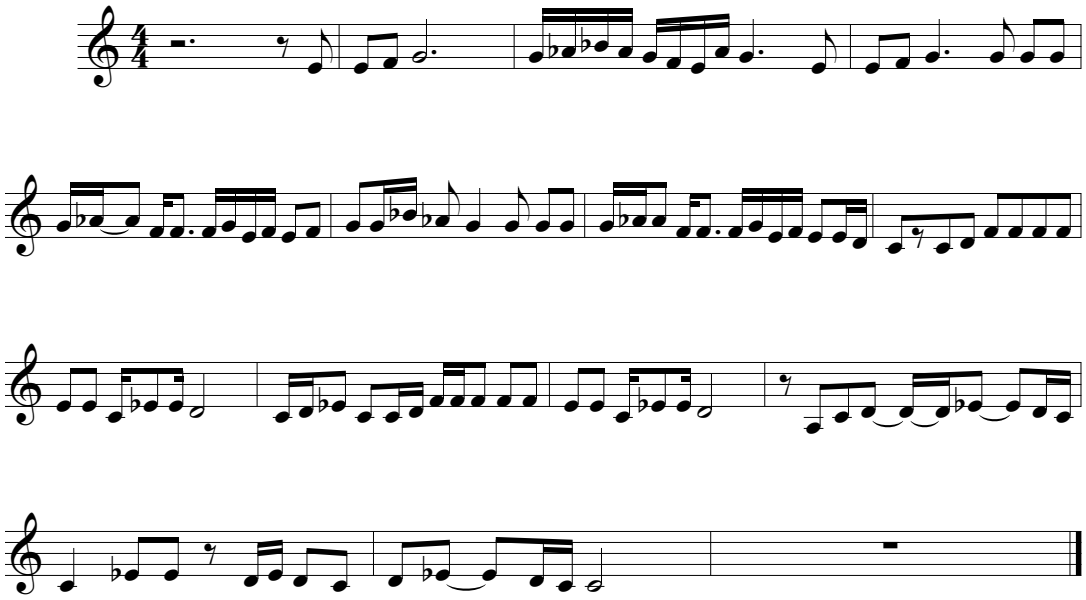

Figure 3: Transcription of "Pancchīdā Bhāī" melody.

Listening guide:[9]

Time Stamp	Structural Element	Musical Element	Other
00:00 (min:sec)			The first 14 seconds are filled by *dhol* tuning and chatter from participants
00:14	Intro – *Sākhī* [10]	Prahlad Tipanya (PT) strumming *tanpura* intermittently between phrases of the *sākhī*, group singing with PT leading	Without warning PT begins
01:06	Main melody	*Tanpura* rhythmic strumming begins, *dholak*, *manjira* and *kartal* join, then solo violin enters with main melody	
01:49	First verse	PT begins text, using violin melodic line	The verses include a call-and-response between the singers and violin player with identical material and different material, as well as accompaniment on the same melody line
02:48	Second verse	Same musical material	After the first phrase, the words are stumbled over, as if forgotten, elongating the verse
03:50	Third verse	Same musical material	
04:51	Spoken word	Constant rhythmic playing, violin holds sustained low pitch here	PT explains some of the meaning behind the song[11]
05:16	Fourth verse	Return to the main melodic material	
06:15	Fifth verse		Some use of secondary words in text, but not all participants realize this – creating audible difference
07:17	Spoken word	*Tanpura* drops out after 10 seconds, violin after 20 seconds, *dhol* after 33 seconds, leaving *manjira* playing	PT explains more, cellphone ringing audible in the background
07:44	Sixth verse	Return to the main melodic material	
08:42	Seventh verse		
09:41	Spoken word	Rhythmic playing continues throughout	PT says a few more words

[9] The multi-day workshop resulted in variations on repeated tunes, "Pancchīdā Bhāī*"* included. This transcription and listening guide were derived from a recording made the first day of the workshop.
[10] Of the two copies of text in my possession, only one includes a *sākhī*; the *sākhī* sung during the workshop differed from the written one. It is common for these *sākhī* to be interchanged with one another.
[11] Most of the participants are not native Malwi speakers. Although similar to Hindi, the meaning of the text is not comprehendible without some explanation. The language barrier is not the only reason for the spoken word interjections here; see more in discussion of performance practice.

09:55	Eighth verse		
10:55	Last verse		
11:44	Ending	Last six beats of the melodic material repeated three times[12]	The last six beats of the last iteration of the verse serves as the first repetition of the ending

Table 1: Listening guide for "Pancchīdā Bhāī."

The melody of this exquisite piece is only one of many interesting things about it. Another is the free tempo and feel to the piece; strict adherence to the transcription in table 1 is not typical—this is a prescriptive transcription (Ellingson 1992:111), serving as a guideline to the piece, omitting embellishments that vary with performance. The most important feature of all of Prahladji's renditions is his performance practice during the songs themselves. All performances by Prahladji are not entirely presentational with clear audience-performer distinctions (as defined in Turino 2008); instead, though still with a clear notion of Prahladji as the performer, he involves the audience in two major ways. First, in many of his pieces he incorporates the practice of lining out, or singing a phrase and then repeating it to allow for the audience to join. In the United States, lining out is a practice associated with Christian hymn singing tradition, but it is common in oral traditions throughout the world—a kind of call-and-response pattern. Secondly, perhaps the most important feature of Prahladji's performances is his explanation of the words and ideas of the songs within the songs themselves. (Artists such as Fariduddin Ayaz, Shiv Suthar, and others have similar performance practices although their effectiveness may differ. This practice is found primarily within the folk realm.) In addition to the language problems between dialects, the meaning is not straightforward for everyone, a

[12] The ending form (three repetitions of ending material) is very common in Indian classical music as well.

common issue with poetry. With the help of Prahladji's explanation, listeners can fully understand the significance of the words.

> Oh bird, my friend,
> why do you wander
> from forest to forest?
> In the city of your body
> is the sacred sound,
> in your own green garden
> is the holy name.
>
> Oh bird, my friend,
> you're sitting in the dark.
> In the temple of your body
> the light shines,
> the guru's teaching gleams.
> Why do you wander
> from forest to forest?
> (Hess forthcoming:463)

This translation of "Pancchīdā Bhāī," as in much poetry across the world, makes use of symbolism, pushing the reader/listener (as is the case in this largely oral tradition) to uncover meaning for him- or herself. However, with sung renditions of poetry, this can prove difficult due to issues of clarity, artistic decisions, uncommon words, and more. Prahladji's interpretation of the text helps listeners understand a meaning and conceptualize the words and poetry on an intellectual level.

It is typical for contemporary performers to comment on their pieces and ideas throughout a concert, but Prahladji differs in his delivery style. Why wait until the end of the piece, when the moment for understanding has already begun slipping away? For Prahladji, the opportunity for learning happens through the performance itself. A "performance" of a piece can go on for anywhere from 5 to 30 minutes (or more) depending on how involved Prahladji becomes with his explanation. In this rendition of "Pancchīdā Bhāī," as displayed in figure 3.3, Prahladji only interjects

with an explanation three different times, each time after a verse, explaining a difficult or particularly inspiring concept that he just finished relaying. I use quotes when calling this a "performance" because of the ambiguous nature of what actually takes place, but for the reader's ease, I will continue to call it a performance (sans quotes), with the understanding that it incorporates much more than a typical presentational performance. This understanding of the use of performance extends into informal contexts, such as the workshop, and more formal ones, such as staged performances.

"Pancchīdā Bhāī" is just one of the many songs that Prahladji uses as a tool for relaying the message of Kabir to others. Another of Prahladji's well-known pieces, "Koi Suntā Hai," is an important work to discuss as well. Within the realm of Prahladji's music this piece is particularly important for a different reason: its melody is also the melody of many other compositions in his repertoire. In my five days with Prahladji in Lunyakhedi, I heard this melody used for four pieces, each with a different text. My association for this melody is strongest with "Koi Suntā Hai" (KSH); as a result, I refer to it as the KSH melody, even when it is being used in another piece. This practice of melodic borrowing is also common in hymn singing; for ease of recollection, many texts are set to the same melody, requiring less work on the part of the collective audience. The oral nature of the tradition explains the necessity of memory aids when possible. Figures 4 and 5 are two different transcriptions of the short melody played on violin (both transcriptions are transposed down a tritone).

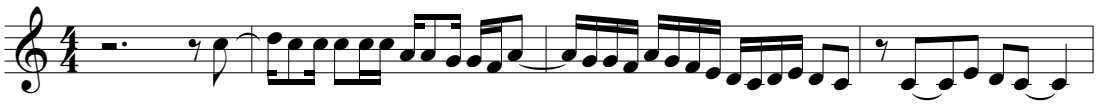

Figure 4: “Koi Suntā Hai” melody 1.

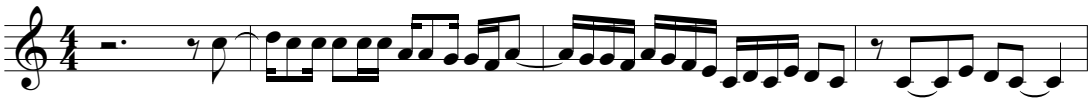

Figure 5: “Koi Suntā Hai” melody 2.

Differences between these two transcriptions are very minimal. The first transcription comes from the workshop in Lunyakhedi in August 2013 and the second is from a performance during the Kabir Festival Mumbai in January 2014. The violinist who accompanies Prahladji, Devnarayan Saroliya, was the same in both recordings. Given the same accompanist, the lapse of time, freedom to improvise within this living (and thus constantly changing) tradition, and lack of written notation explains these differences in melody.

Kumar’s Kabir

Prahladji, one of the most respected Kabir musicians of today, is not the only one to leave a lasting mark on the sounds of Kabir. Another important figure in the musical life of Kabir is Kumar Gandharva. Born in 1924 in southern India as Shivaputra Siddramayya Komkalimath, Kumarji started his Hindustani classical vocal career as a child; the world quickly recognized his musical genius. Renamed Gandharva after the musical spirit in Hindu mythology, he quickly outgrew his teacher and began making waves in the classical community by breaking out of the *gharānā* tradition and continually pushing the boundaries of classical vocal music. At a very young age, Kumarji contracted tuberculosis and was under strict orders not to sing at all and to move to a clean environment that would help his health. He moved

to Dewas, in Madhya Pradesh (in central India). Here, he first heard the sounds of the passing yogis who sang many religious songs. What struck him was not the beauty of the songs or the singers' voices themselves, but rather the raw emotional power with which they sang (Hess 2009:30-1). Eventually, a cure for tuberculosis was created and Kumarji was able to sing again; as a result of this imposed silent period, he was greatly influenced by the *nirguṇ bhajans* and the folk sounds of Madhya Pradesh that would become a part of his music and his legacy.

Kumarji's style is firmly rooted in the classical world, but displays great innovation due to Kumarji's own inner creativity and his interaction with other styles. While remaining classical at its foundation, his singing style is distinctly different from other classical singers, and is even controversial to some for its breaks with tradition. Prahladji and others also perform many works (same poetic text) as performed by Kumarji. While a comparison of the melodies of each person's rendition does nothing more than highlight the stark differences already expressed by the completely different sound, it is interesting to note that only after listening to Kumarji's version of "Shūnya Gaḍh Shahar Shahar Ghar Basti" multiple times did I realize that I had already heard a different version of the same text by Prahladji. Their sonic qualities were so extremely contrasting that I did not even recognize they shared the same text at first.

When first envisioning the focus of this section, an emphasis on Prahladji and Kumarji seemed only natural, as they are two of the most influential musicians to have touched Kabir's words in the past century. More important than their own sounds, however, is the lasting effect they had on other artists; their music constantly

inspires other musicians, dancers, and storytellers alike; additionally, their mentorship has helped younger artists realize their dreams of Kabir into works of art. The Kabir Festival Mumbai 2014 allowed for a glimpse into the musical lives of some of the newer Kabir artists of today, side-by-side with the older musicians of the genre.

Current Kabir artists have varying degrees of contact with Kumarji's or Prahladji's work, so claiming influence of these greats on all young artists is simply not fair. Some artists have clear ties to these greats and make their connections known from the very start. One such artist is Kathak dancer Sanjukta Wagh. Although I did not attend her scheduled performance in the five-day festival held across the vast city of Mumbai, Sanjuktaji gave an impromptu performance at an after-party held on the last day of the festival, a performance that I was fortunate enough to catch. Describing Sanjuktaji's performance will be difficult for two reasons; first, I am not an expert in Kathak, so describing it technically is out of the question; more importantly, her performance was so moving and awe-inspiring that I am not sure there are actually words in existence to use in description.

The spontaneous performance arose in an after-party for all of the artists and organizers of the festival; the party also gave all the performers in attendance the opportunity to play, even those not actually performing in the festival (like myself and other musicians who were at the party). In the early hours of the morning, the intensity of the performances decreased and the group's consciousness shifted to a space of reflection and sharing about the festival and the role it plays in our lives. This discussion led us to reflect on the place of Kabir in people's lives as well. Sanjuktaji's performance was the last of the night. The atmosphere in the room was

so peaceful and inwardly focused that once her dance concluded, there was simply no space for anyone to speak; the room was filled with overpowering joy and *shānt*, which literally translated means quiet, calm, or peace. In this context, I am using *shānt* to imply something greater than peace—perhaps oneness or understanding of the quiet self that exists in the body and in others and in the world around us. It was in this moment that I truly understood. I had experienced the essence of what everyone around me had been singing and dancing about for the past few years. In that moment, I was no longer merely looking at this musical event from a research perspective, trying to understand the music and its social world, but rather I was part of that social world and inherently understood the meaning with ease.

The dance was only part of the experience that leaves me searching for words to convey that moment. In addition to the artistry of Sanjuktaji and the group's emotional state, there was the incredible accompaniment provided by a handful of individual musicians who did not regularly play with one another. Bindhumalini Narayanaswamy sang Kabir's "Hīranā," accompanied by Vedanth Bharadwaj on guitar, Vivek Virani on tabla, Mukund Ramaswamy on violin, and Raman Iyer on mandolin. Out of this group, Bindhumaliniji and Vedanthji have collaborated before, and the violinist and mandolin player are both members of the Flameshot Fakirs, while Vivek is a fellow ethnomusicologist carrying out his own research in Indian music.

Breaking the silence after her performance, Sanjuktaji provided some context to the audience for her interpretation of Kabir. Most importantly, she said very explicitly that "Kumar's Kabir" inspired her. This phrase, "so-and-so's Kabir," comes

up quite frequently when talking about musical renditions of Kabir's words. Most often heard is "Kumar's Kabir," but other well-known artists have created their own distinct "Kabir" that means something entirely different to them and those who listen to their music. Kabirs portrayed by Prahladji or Mukhtiyar Ali (a folk artist from Rajasthan) are well-known sounds in the folk world, but among the larger Indian population, Kumarji has the wider reach because of his musical and social status prior to his involvement with the music of Kabir. This notion of an individualistic Kabir, belonging to different artists so to speak, gives an insight into the philosophy of Kabir. As Prahladji explains Kabir's urging to find the guru within and look to your own experiences to gain knowledge, this personalization of the words of Kabir into very individualistic musical sound parallels this idea. The teachings of Kabir are open to interpretation by the individual, and different people find a wide range of meanings from the same words; accordingly, the music that comes from these words should be individualized. Once this happens, whether in musical sounds or thoughts alone, Kabir becomes a real entity—not simply a poet from the past who is long dead, but rather a very real, very knowledgeable guru, originating from within the individual him/herself.

A Popular Kabir

Although Kabir can originate in all individuals, one is usually introduced to one version or another of Kabir before fully embodying their own Kabir. Prahlad Tipanya, as already stated, is one of the best-known musicians singing Kabir's works today. However, a younger voice directly inspired by Prahladji has surfaced in the Kabir realm. Neeraj Arya, a young musician from New Delhi, is looking backwards and

drawing directly from the Kabir that Prahladji has presented to the world, while simultaneously creating completely new sonic stamps of Kabir in a popular, cosmopolitan format.

Known throughout the festival as the Flameshot Fakirs, Neerajji and his group are more commonly known as Neeraj Arya's Kabir Café. The group consists of Neerajji on vocals, supported by violin, mandolin, guitar, bass, drum set, and auxiliary percussion (hand drums, jaw harp, etc.). Despite using completely different styles and instrumental makeup, Neerajji and Prahladji share a history, and thus their music is more closely related than meets the ear. Neerajji learned from Prahladji, continues to look to him for inspiration, and also borrows from his music. Rather than using Prahladji's music simply for inspiration or the other extreme of sampling full musical sections, he transplants both words and melodic material while making it fully his own.

One of Prahladji's more popular poetic renditions is "Halke Gādi Hāko"; it was also Neerajji's first official song released on YouTube. When listening to many performances of Prahladji's version, of course there are slight variances from one rendition to the next, but the melodic material stays essentially the same. Played back-to-back with Neerajji's version, it is clear that one is not simply an inspiration for the other, but rather a blueprint. In Neerajji's YouTube release, he entitles the track "Halke Gaadi Haako: Contemporary Folk Fusion by Neeraj Arya's Kabir Cafe - Official Video." Nowhere is Prahladji credited, but instead Kabir is credited in the name of the group. Additionally, the genre is labeled here: branding the sound as folk, but simultaneously fusion and contemporary. In live performances and in

conversation, Neerajji is very forthcoming about Prahladji's group being his source of musical inspiration. There is no deception about where the ideas or content come from, but it seems that these are less important than the message itself.

This seems to be a common theme throughout the Kabir oral tradition. Emphasis is not placed on the source of the musical content but rather on the message itself and the poet (Kabir) who is responsible for the ideological content. At the after-party, a band member of Neerajji's shared a personal story of his involvement with the group. Once he tried once to thank Neerajji, but Neerajji did not accept his thanks outright, and instead passed the credit along to Kabir—saying that everything he does is Kabir's, not his own. The question of ownership and authenticity arises in many conversations surrounding many oral traditions worldwide. In the case of Kabir music, at least for the moment, individuals seem less concerned with credit and fame and more focused on the meaning of the songs themselves. Perhaps this is an idealized view of current practice, and time will tell another story, but at least among the individuals I have meet through Kabir, spreading the words and ideas of Kabir is really at the heart of their art, whether it be through music, storytelling, dance, or something else.

The new Kabir that Neerajji's group has brought to life through their music is far more important than concerns of ownership. Neerajji's group has made Kabir accessible to a new generation—one that might not aesthetically connect to the sounds of folk or classical music. As part of the festival, the Flameshot Fakirs performed at a venue in Mumbai called the Blue Frog. As a nightclub and popular music performance space, the Blue Frog attracts a different clientele from that which

Kabir's music typically attracts. For personal and moral reasons, Prahladji would not perform at a venue like the Blue Frog, and even if he would consider it, his musical sounds and performance practice would be discordant in the Blue Frog atmosphere. In contrast, the popular sounds of Neerajji's group allow Kabir to reach a wider audience, crossing boundaries of age and socioeconomic status and bringing Kabir into a modern cosmopolitan landscape.

There is an endless line of examples to show the many faces of Kabir from the brief 2014 Kabir Festival alone. The conclusions drawn will likely remain unchanged regardless of how many examples I refer to here: Kabir is at once completely individual and shared among a large community. The concept of "so-and-so's Kabir" will likely continue to be pervasive as long as there are extremely popular and influential musicians. These musicians and others seem to understand the need for a Kabir that continually changes form and grows and thus allows for a broader population base to connect to him at once. When attempting to explain the phenomenon of Kabir in India, I looked for a similar case in the United States, but was unable to identify a similar phenomenon. Kabir is unique because of his lasting popularity and the diverse sounds that grew out of his legacy and variety of poetry, and because of this the Kabir "genre" is unlike most other musical traditions.

Chapter 4: Kabir in Social Contexts

Kabir in Modern India

The Kabir Project and Other Events

As previously mentioned, The Kabir Project has been a catalyst for spreading Kabir's music during the past decade. Filmmaker Shubnam Virmani set out in search of Kabir, and in the process of doing so found the many sides of Kabir—or many "Kabirs." Filming her many journeys that took her into various realms – sacred and secular, foreign and domestic—she produced four films that now serve to spread the image of Kabir in significant ways. Along with the films, there are six printed poetry books (in both Hindi and English) along with recordings that also mediate the image of Kabir to many inside and outside of India. One of the book-CD sets, my first, was purchased in a posh New Delhi shopping center that caters to foreigners and the upper classes (financially) of cosmopolitan Delhi: two groups that are otherwise not as likely to come into contact with the ideology and music of Kabir.

Not all the credit for spreading the word of Kabir can go to The Kabir Project. Although my first introduction to Kabir was through products of the Project, my first in-depth experience with Kabir (Kabir music, Kabir philosophy, others involved with Kabir) was in a workshop organized through the Kabir Festival Mumbai (a group related to The Kabir Project, but not actually a part of it). Events like the workshop I attended with Prahladji, in addition to a number of other singer-driven events, occur

annually. Beyond his workshop, Prahladji annually organizes a Kabir *yatra* in Malwa. These *yatras* typically last a week, and are mobile, happening in a number of different venues and contexts throughout the region. Prahladji is a central attraction for performances, but he is not the only performer in these events. He invites other performers to share the stage with him and shares their music with the communities they visit—communities he has connections in. The artists he invites come from a number of diverse backgrounds musically, and thus have very different sonic signatures. This variety brings in a larger audience, looking for a diversity of sounds.

The *yatra* organized by Prahladji is one of the many that have taken place in the past few years. The Malwa *yatra* occurs annually, while others such as the Rajasthan *yatra* happen more sporadically. These *yatras* are only one type of event that artists like Prahladji organize or join to spread the word of Kabir. Just recently, in early 2014, Prahladji and his group were invited to Dubai to play at the Indian Embassy. Events such as this and others happen frequently. Since I am closest to Prahladji, I know about his performances, but there are numerous events of which I am unaware that take place on a daily basis, performed by other artists who are continually spreading the words of Kabir.

Festivals

The largest annual event of Kabir is the Kabir Festival in Mumbai, held at the start of each year. Festivals are held throughout India and abroad; the Mumbai festival is the best publicized and most consistently held. The year 2014 marked the festival's third season, a result of the work of the Kabir Community of Mumbai. Virmani's films and The Kabir Project inspired this group, and that inspiration helped

shape the annual festival. The goal of the festival is to capture the essence of Kabir's work and share it with as many people as possible. The artists who perform Kabir works are important, and they are a highlight of the festival, yet there is much more to the festival than the nightly musical performances. The festival is a space for film screenings followed by discussion, dance performances, academic lectures, inclusive morning-music sessions, storytelling, and many informal conversations about Kabir and his words.

This year's Kabir Festival Mumbai included many artists in addition to Neeraj Arya's group and the Kathak dancer Sanjukta Wagh, discussed in the previous chapter. Bindhumalini Narayanaswamy and Vedanth Bharadwaj, two internationally visible performers, were also featured. Both are singers, and Vedanthji also plays banjo and guitar. The duo recently produced a CD that incorporates a number of other instruments into their style. Various percussion instruments, accordion, flute, and other instruments allow for the two to seamlessly go between a number of different sounds. Their flexibility as musicians serves as a foundation on which they create a number of pieces that are wholly different from one another, and these range from a blues-style solo to semi-classical sounds to a fusion of Hindustani and Carnatic classical ideas with Western guitar chords and auxiliary instruments. Their musical talents allow them to create a number of different sounds, but their performance at the Kabir Festival Mumbai was a collaboration with an artist from another medium and thus presented a slightly different sound from that heard on the CD.

At the festival, Bindhumaliniji and Vedanthji combined forces with Ankit Chadha, a talented storyteller specializing in *dastangoi*, the Urdu art of oral

storytelling. Ankitji, accompanied by Bindhumaliniji and Vedanthji on vocals along with *dhol* player Ajay Tipanya, told a story about Amir Khusrau, a Sufi mystic musician, poet, and scholar who predated Kabir's life by roughly a century. The musical narrative explored the relationship between Amir Khusrau and his spiritual guide, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya. Ankitji's performance provoked lively applause from the crowd. While Ankitji performed a section of the narrative, Vedanthji played lightly on the banjo in the background, establishing a pitch center. The narrative was broken into sections by poetic interjections, sung by Bindhumaliniji and Vedanthji and accompanied by Ajayji; the music (poetry) was contextualized by the narration that surrounded it. The performance was more than a performance: it was an experience. And yet, the focus of the musical narrative was not Kabir, but someone related to Kabir in terms of ideology and poetry.

The festival also brought Bharatanatyam dancer Rama Vaidyanathan to perform "Mad and Divine," a thematic dance production that tells a narrative of Jana Bai (a Maharashtran poetess) and Lalded (a Kashmiri poetess). Despite taking different routes and having different backgrounds, both poetesses embarked on a journey to attain closeness to the lord. Jana Bai and Lalded are both still important in their respective regions, and their poems are still influential literature inside and outside of religious spheres. Both resemble Kabir in a number of ways: all share a common life story of origin in the lower classes, hardships, and eventual evolution to create long-lasting poetry.

There were a number of other artists also in attendance at the Kabir Festival Mumbai whose creative endeavors were linked to Kabir's ideas or sounds, but whose

art was not about Kabir directly. This decision to incorporate a variety of Kabir-related performers was made deliberately by the organizers of the festival. This conscious choice falls in line with Kabir ideology and who Kabir actually "is." Kabir is no longer a single person, a single idea, but has evolved into an ideology. Perhaps to some he was never a real person, but rather a mystical or mythical figure who can be likened to a god to some degree. Yet even to those who believe he was a flesh-and-blood man, he has ceased to be merely mortal and grown into the ideology and complex system of individuals who perpetuate his words and sounds today. Similarly, as Kabir himself is unbounded and has permeated many realms of life and different groups, it is fitting that the festival should also include not only the words and sounds that are joined to Kabir's name, but also anything and everything fitting into the Kabir ideology that speaks to people on an emotional and spiritual level.

Using this same philosophy, the organizers of the festival intentionally planned the events at venues all over the city of Mumbai and into many of the suburbs. It was physically impossible to attend more than two or three events in a day (attending three was only feasible if there was an early morning event), and each day the schedule included five or six events. This was intended to allow the largest and widest exposure to Kabir across the city. Kabir's message is for everyone, and the festival was planned to help facilitate that goal. This physical restriction enhanced each individual event—an unintended side effect. Since attendees did not have the ability to dart from one event to the next, they allowed themselves to become fully immersed in the events. In many cases, the events served as a space for old friends to

reunite and new friends to be created with the help of the mutually shared interest in Kabir.

Personal and Professional Contexts

After singing one of my favorite pieces, "Koī Sunta Hai," Prahladji wrapped up the performance for the night and everyone clapped. I turned to my old friends, whom I had not seen since the previous summer, and exchanged some parting words. Then, a man who identified himself as a colonel approached me, questioning my knowledge of Kabir's poems, noting that he saw me singing along. After a brief conversation with some necessary background, he invited me to his meditation sessions, held every full moon. Why? I don't meditate, and I have no connections to this man. The love for Kabir and this living folk music is enough.

Invitations like this were commonplace throughout the workshop and festival. After developing personal connections with a shared passion for music and Kabir, an invitation to someone's house, village, or specific event was not surprising. Kabir's sounds and ideas permeate society and individuals' lives both personally and professionally. For the colonel, this space lives in his regular meditation sessions; he opens his private space to friends, meditators, and Kabir enthusiasts to share in the music making and introspection. Although I was unable to attend any of his sessions (in Mumbai or Delhi), in our brief conversation the colonel told me that Kabir music fills the meditation space; they only use the music of Kabir from artists like Prahladji in these events.

While Kabir fills some people's personal lives, like the colonel and others who enjoy music in the privacy of their homes and daily lives, Kabir also finds his

place in professional settings. Pravah, the youth development non-governmental organization (NGO) where I worked for a year while living in Delhi, is one such organization. The various branches of Pravah across India provide developmental workshops to children and youth, individuals who work with youth, and other professionals. In one of the facilitator training programs (for people working with youth), Kabir *dohās* are used. The particular session that employs one of Kabir's well-known *dohās* (roughly translated to "Kabir stands in the market, staff in hand, whoever burns his house, come along with me") is about letting go and allowing something that is not working in your life to simply fall away, permitting yourself to move past it. The *dohā* is intended to inspire the participants to reflect on their lives and perceive things in ways they do not see them in everyday life (personal communication, Ritikaa Khunnah, 2014), encouraging self-criticism, self-awareness, and hopefully transformation.

Kabir's ideas are commonly used in the NGO world, where social activism and development reign supreme; in this environment, Kabir's ideology has room to thrive. NGOs often work with underrepresented or marginalized groups; for a number of reasons, Kabir's words and life story resonate with many of these groups. Beyond the religious attachment, which is strong across all divisions in society, Kabir's words provoke and inspire individuals to question and think for themselves. Delivered in a package that is familiar and enjoyable (distinct regional styles and folk music), these philosophical ideas springing from the work of Kabir provide a foundation for teaching, self-development, and individual and communal growth.

Pravah is not the only NGO to have utilized Kabir's poetry. For the majority of the 1990s, Eklavya, an educational NGO in Madhya Pradesh, hosted "*Kabir bhajan evam vichār manch*" (Hess forthcoming:443), a reoccurring event where members of various local communities sang Kabir *bhajans*, followed by conversation about the very words just sang. A *manch* is a platform or stage and *vichar* literally means thought or idea. So, this space was not just a space for *bhajans*—not uncommon in a number of settings, especially rural ones—but was unique in its discussion component. This liminal space, created and solidified by the *bhajans*, provided the foundation for much more than musical enjoyment. In her forthcoming book *Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India*, Linda Hess discusses Eklavya and this *manch* in detail, so I will not expand on it here other than to say that Kabir's place in the professional world gravitates toward socially conscious organizations and individuals, highlighting one of the prominent messages of Kabir's works—social equality and empowerment.

Religious Contexts

Different groups know different Kabirs. For some, Kabir is a sharp-tongued, quick-witted critic; for others, he is a spiritual guide, full of wisdom and words used in devotional practices. Both of these are Kabir. In Sikh worship services, Kabir poetry is sung seamlessly alongside other devotional poetry; many of these poems are from Sikh Gurus, preserved in the Sikh canons (Hawley 2005:270). In this case, the acceptance of Kabir is institutionalized within the religious texts themselves, although Kabir's place is supplementary to religious ideology. In other cases, this is less clear, and Kabir's poetry is associated with and informally accepted in many religious lines

of thought. Similarly, Kabir's poetry also complements Sufi poetry such as that of Bulleh Shah, performed by Sonam Kalra and the Sufi Gospel Project, a band that uses musical fusion as an example of the unity of all faith, blending Indian classical and Western music traditions to communicate the union of spiritual poetry, gospel song, and more. This blend of sound showcased at the Kabir Festival along with the inclusion of the Amir Khusrau narrative reflect Kabir's flirtation with and integration into Sufism in practice and in theory.

Every charismatic individual will produce some semblance of a following for himself or herself—intentional or accidental; Kabir was no exception. Much like Kabir himself, the Kabir Panth, officially recognized as a religion in the late 1800s (Friedlander 2010:3), is unclear in its origin story. The Panth takes Kabir as their founder and guru, though it is unclear what founder means in this context; founder generally implies a consciousness on the part of the individual, and I doubt that this was true for Kabir. Assuming that Kabir died in the early sixteenth century, his knowledge of the Panth hinges on its establishment. Without definitive knowledge of this we are unable to comment on Kabir's involvement with the organizing of the religion; it is a question best left to historians. For the sake of this discussion, the members of the religion and their practices, namely their musical habits, are more important.

Singing *bhajans*, presumably predominantly Kabir's, is mandatory in the Kabir Panth (Westcott 2012:113). In addition to daily life and personal devotion, *bhajans* are also used in religious ceremonies (ibid.:122). While some disagree with the Panth's devotion to Kabir, saying that it flies in the face of Kabir's teachings that

criticize organized religion, there are many followers in the Panth, both inside and outside of India. Even Prahladji, the popular folk singer, joined the Panth in 2003 as a *mahant,* an individual authorized to spread the word of Kabir and use the Panth's name (*Kabira Khada Bazaar Mein* 2010). Although he joined the Panth and played the part for some time, Prahladji had reservations about the Kabir Panth and desired to change it from within. Eventually he questioned and pushed too much and was asked to leave the organization.

Depending on where one stands, one sees a different view of Kabir: the religious Kabir(s)—including the "Sikhs' Kabir," the "Vaishnava Kabir," and the "Banarsi Kabir" (Hawley 2005: 269)—the biting Kabir, Kumar's Kabir, Prahladji's Kabir, my Kabir, your Kabir. The list goes on and on.

> Brother, where did your two gods come from?
> Tell me, who made you mad?
> Ram, Allah, Keshav, Karim, Hari, Hazrat–
> so many names.
> So many ornaments, all one gold,
> it has no double nature.
> (Hess and Singh 1983:50-1)

This excerpt highlights Kabir's criticism of organized religion. Much like many of his admirers today, Kabir saw the problems within some of the religions independently, especially when conflicts arose between various religious sects. Nevertheless, for every excerpt that "proves" Kabir's distain for organized religion, there are many others that show the softer, devotional side of Kabir. Just like his poetry, for as many religious settings in which Kabir exists, there are surely many others to contradict those contexts.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Despite the many myths around his birth story, Kabir was a mere human. However, his legacy is larger than his life as a man. Kabir is known for his poetry, whether religious and soft or social and biting. I set out on my research to answer the questions *Who is Kabir?* and *Why is Kabir*—this simple weaver poet from over 500 years ago—*still important*? These two questions are not unrelated. Kabir, this once-man, is no longer just a man who lived in the past. He has gone beyond that and has transcended into ideology. Much like scholars think of Karl Marx as a person (but more importantly, the founder of the ideology that developed from his words and ideas: Marxism), Kabir can be thought of similarly as going beyond his physical form to this unbounded theoretical form; Kabir the poet has evolved into Kabir the sounds, the ideology, and the people.

Kabir can also be conceptualized along the same lines as Jesus. Unlike Marx, and more like Jesus, Kabir's image is ambiguous, and yet his ties to religion(s) are undeniable. Although many use Kabir's *dohās* in religious contexts, in many of his poems Kabir suggests leaving the rituals of both Hinduism and Islam and looking inward to fulfill spiritual needs, implying that individuals have all they need within. Still, Kabir's poems are common in many religious practices throughout the Indian subcontinent.

Kabir was revolutionary in his era, and the living folk music of Kabir continues to be revolutionary today—revolutionary and yet relevant. Kabir pushed

against social boundaries through his words over five hundred years ago, but his words remain subversive in today's India. Kabir's ideas have attracted the marginalized and oppressed for years, and this attraction continues today. Beyond simply empowering the lower class, Kabir's music brings a diverse selection of the community together, pushing and provoking. For my friend Swati, a fellow Kabir-appreciator, Kabir is a radical. For her, Kabir means being radical. In a conversation with Swati and her husband during the festival in January, both expressed their admiration for Kabir and the way he has changed their thinking over the years. With plans to move out of the comfortable city life in the near future, the two continue to regard Kabir as important in their growth as individuals.

They are not alone in this sentiment. On the last night of the festival, after the closing performance, all of the artists, volunteers, and others involved with the festival in various capacities (myself included—technically just an attendee, but much more in reality) gathered for an after-party. The celebration lasted for almost five hours. First we ate, then we sang and danced and laughed. Last, we shared and told our own stories after hearing the many of Kabir and other revolutionary thinkers for the past week. For the sake of privacy, I will not include names, but suffice it to say that every individual is on their own journey with Kabir. Some told of personal growth, being more socially conscious and connecting to others in ways they previously had not. Others told of the many strong relationships they developed because of their involvement with the festival as a whole, from the music to the planning and more. Many of the artists told of their artistic relationship with Kabir, crediting Kabir with their professional successes and even attributing personal

success to Kabir. One artist even told of his relationship with his mother, how it had developed over his career, and the importance that the Kabir Festival Mumbai played in his relationships.

This is why Kabir is still important today: he has something for everyone and he does something for everyone. The living folk music of Kabir—the musical tradition, the poetry, the thought, everything that it encompasses—is incredibly diverse, found in many regions, many languages, and many musical styles, and is forever changing with the times. Regardless of preference, there is something for everyone. Everything that is included in this diverse concept that is Kabir affects different individuals in different ways. Whether one likes the sounds of Kabir for aesthetic value, the community Kabir provides, or the criticisms the poetry dispenses, there is something that reaches out to everyone. This is why Kabir lives; this is why Kabir remains relevant. The flexible identity of what constitutes Kabir allows for the development and sustaining of the sometimes-conflicting ideology. The widespread occurrence of the tradition allowed for the synthesis of Kabir's words with a variety of genres and regional dialects. The forever changing nature of the sounds continues to allow for the longevity of the tradition. Kabir is a man, an ideology, a revolutionary, an ideal, and much more.

Glossary

Bhajan: praise or devotional song, sung in the context of worship

Bhakta: male devotee who has fully committed himself to worship of a particular god; generally used when discussing the saguṇ tradition; similar to *sant*

Bhakti: devotional poetic tradition that emerged in India in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

Dholak: barrel hand drum, originating in the Punjabi region, but now common throughout folk styles across India

Dohā: rhyming couplet, often with end-rhymes, similar to the heroic couplet in English poetry, sometimes called *sākhī*

Gharānā: organizational system that links musicians and dancers through lineage and a particular style

Kartal: rhythmic instrument made of two blocks of wood, generally with copper plates for rattles, similar to the sound of a tambourine

Lok sangīt: folk music

Manjira: small finger cymbals

Nirguṇ: without qualities or attributes; used in the Kabir context to describe god

Pada: verse, poem, or song

Parampara: tradition

Rāga: tonal structure within which performs improvise variations

Rāgini: 'female' structure equivalent to *rāga*

Ramainī: poetic form common in the Kabir canon; contains two parts

Saguṇ: with qualities or attributes; used in the Kabir context to describe god

Sākhī: also called *dohā*

Sant: devotee, pious or holy man; used to distinguish those within the *nirguṇ* belief system

Shabd: also called pada occasionally

Shānt: calm, peace, quiet

Tanpura: long-necked lute, used as a rhythmic drone

Yatra: trip, journey; in Kabir community, trips dedicated to Kabir music and discussion

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